The Making of a Racist

My favorite children’s book when I was growing up was entitled *Ezekiel*, written by a white Floridian named Elvira Garner. This slender volume was published in New York by Henry Holt and Company in 1937, the year I was born (Canadian distribution was by Oxford University Press).

The first story in the book opens this way:

“Away down in Sanford, Florida dar lives a lil’ cullerd boy, an’ he names Ezekiel. An’ dis boy he live wid he Pappy an’ he Mammy an’ he Sister Emancipation, an’ he brudder Lil’ Plural an’ Assafetida, de baby.”

I took endless delight in Ezekiel’s adventures on “de St. John’s Ribber,” as he caught a “big ole cat-fish” in this opening story, unsuccessfully looked for work on a steamboat (“Lil’ nigger boy, you too small,” the “Cap’n” told him), but, through persistence and politeness, landed a job for “he Pappy” on the self-same vessel, “a-rollin’ an’ a-totin’ an’ a-draggin’ things onto ole freight boat.”

This opening chapter, like all of the six stories in the book, is illustrated by the author’s watercolor drawings of stick figures with coal black faces acting out passages in the text, such as Ezekiel “got lil’ ole fishin’ pole outen de shed,” while “Emancipation went ’long pullin’ de baby in lil’ ole cyart” and “Lil’ Plural toten’ de bait can.”

Each chapter—each individual story—also ends with a four-line song, also in dialect, such as this one at the end of chapter 1:
Ole ribber run norf, an don’ run souf.
Ole cat-fish he tas’e fine!
Pappy got a dandy job
On de St. John’s Ribber Line.

My earliest childhood memory, literally the first thing I can recall about my life, is sitting in my mother’s lap having her read these stories to me.

After this opening chapter, our plucky, intrepid hero’s boyhood adventures continue:

Ezekiel talking his way onto a field-work gang “settin’ celery” (“Miss Little Sister,” his crew boss, “is pow’ful large”—Garner’s drawing shows a very heavy-set African American woman standing arms akimbo).

Ezekiel searching for a “Chris’mus tree big nuff to hol’ all dat you say Santy gwine bring.”

Ezekiel going “to de big fair to Orlando,” where a sideshow barker, “a fine white gem’man,” displays the baby, Assafetida, up on stage as a “genuine golliwog from the wilds of Ethiopia.”

Ezekiel looking for buried treasure (“Spanish gem’man bury de’ big box er’ gol’ in swamp . . . an’ ain’ never cum back to git hit”).

Ezekiel listening to tales told by “Unc Adam Joshua,” who “say he nigh ’bout hundered year ole”—stories of “Injuns” and “a gret big ‘gaitor” and “Brer Mockin’ Bird” (but, strangely enough, not a word about slavery).

I am certain that Dear and I used to sing the songs sprinkled throughout the book because the lyrics to one of these contains two penciled additions in my mother’s beautiful handwriting:

ole
To hear ^ Jordan roll.
Roll Jordan, roll,
Roll Jordan, roll.
Ah wants to go to Heabin when Ah die,

ole
To hear ^ Jordan roll.

And I am sure we sang these songs in dialect; Dear inserted “ole,” not “old,” to conform to lines like “Ah wants to go to Heabin when Ah die.”

In 1991, John and I were going through our house in St. Petersburg after Dear’s death when I spotted Ezekiel in a small hall bookcase just outside the “baby room.” I recognized it the moment I saw it, and I was flooded with a mixture of emotions as soon as I opened it—those wonderful childhood memories of Dear reading to me, immense sadness at her recent death, and absolute, appalling amazement at the content of these stories, the dialect in which they were told, and the drawings that accompanied the text. I now realize that this book was the beginning of a long process of my education as a southerner, particularly my acculturation into the white South’s racial attitudes. There was nothing mean or malevolent in Dear’s reading these stories to me; I do not believe she had a mean or malevolent bone in her body. She was also highly intelligent. As Pop would say, she “wasn’t hiding behind the barn when the brains were handed out” (later, when I was at Woodberry and kidded her about going to “finishing school,” she laughed and said if she had, she would not have had to read so much Proust). In addition to being smart, she was also gentle, thoughtful, empathetic, and compassionate. I am not overselling her here in the slightest; everyone who knew her would agree with this description. But she was also someone brought up in a place and time when whites did not consider these portrayals of African Americans either offensive or outlandish. Indeed, just the opposite was true. I am sure she found these stories totally appropriate for a white mother to read to her son as soon as he was able to enjoy them. And enjoy them I did.
And this is what I learned from them:
Colored folks are funny.
Colored folks talk funny.
Their names are funny.
Their antics are funny.

Their physical appearance and movements and gaudy, ill-fitting clothes are funny. Those stick figures conveyed all of this, even though their faces were anonymous and almost totally devoid of definition. Only occasionally could one make out what appeared to be a grin on a figure shown in profile, and their hair was spiked and sticking out from the back of their heads.

Most of all, colored folks are different from us white folks—different in color, different in speech, different in ways too numerous to mention, a “different breed of cat,” as my father would put it. And because colored folks are so profoundly different, the next step came easy: colored folks are inferior.

These early messages received confirmation everywhere I looked.

I realize now that many of the Jim Crow customs I learned growing up I absorbed more through a process of osmosis than through verbal instruction. I was, to quote a religious phrase (not inappropriate given the transcendent importance of maintaining proper racial etiquette at all times), simply bearing witness to what was going on every day all around me.

There were two jelly glasses and two sets of chipped, orange-colored china—plates, bowls, cups and saucers—in a separate corner of one of our kitchen cupboards. They were used exclusively by Ed, the black man who mowed our lawn, and by Illinois, the black woman who cleaned our house, did our laundry, ironed our sheets, and sometimes cooked our dinner.

I learned very quickly that I should use the nice tiled bathroom on the second floor of our house. The not-so-nicely appointed half bath off the back porch—wooden floor, small sink attached to
the wall, white paint on the toilet seat so worn the wood showed through—was for Illinois and Ed. Our two bathrooms did not have signs, ubiquitous on public restrooms across the southern landscape, reading “White” and “Colored” over the doors, but it would have been perfectly appropriate if they had.

I learned never to shake hands with an African American person. Pop never did, Dear never did, so I never did.

I addressed African American men and women who worked for us by their first names. I did not use their last names prefaced by Mr. or Mrs. or Miss because my parents never did.

I learned, on a morning I shall never forget, that African Americans arriving at our house should always use the back doors.

Lillian Smith wrote in her magnificent autobiography *Killers of the Dream* that white children growing up in the Jim Crow South always experienced a moment of revelation, a flash of lightning that illuminated in a blinding instant what segregation means.2 (Of course, as Anne Moody tells us in her equally brilliant autobiography *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, black children experienced the same lightning flash but from the perspective of the oppressed, not the oppressor.)3 The day a black man came to the wrong door of our house was my day of Jim Crow lightning.

I was eight years old. It was 1945, and World War II had recently ended. We had just started using the car again following the end of wartime rationing, and I remember very well the first two times we took anything approaching a frivolous drive: the first was V-E Day and the second was V-J Day. On these two occasions, the four of us piled into our 1939 Buick and headed downtown to celebrate our victories over Nazi Germany and the Empire of Japan. We circled St. Pete’s premier tourist attraction, our mammoth (as it seemed to me) “Million Dollar Pier,” honking our horn, waving from the windows, and yelling our heads off. And in the following weeks, Pop was driving to his office again and dropping me off at North Ward School on his way to work.
On the morning in question, the black man who owned Bill’s Shoe Shine Parlor had come to our house to make an apology to my father. Bill’s business was located in an arcade off an alley near the Florida National Bank Building, where Pop had his office. I am not sure what prompted the need for an apology, but I strongly suspect one of Bill’s shoeshine “boys” (most were grown men) had said something that offended my father or Pop had simply heard an offhand comment one of them had made and had taken objection to it. Whatever the reason, Pop had clearly stormed off in anger. My father went to Bill’s often to get his handsome, two-toned spectators shined, and Bill (I never learned his last name) obviously did not want to lose Pop’s patronage.

We kept our car under a porte cochere on the west side of our house and accessed the car every morning through a side door just off our living room. Bill was waiting just outside that door. I heard him say, “Mr. Dew, I’m really sorry . . .” He never got to finish that sentence. Pop tore into him with an explosive verbal assault that was unlike anything I had ever heard before. Bill had committed the unpardonable sin of coming to the wrong door. I had never seen my father so angry, had never seen him react to anything or anyone with such fury. I do not remember his words. I think I was too frightened to register what he was yelling at Bill. But I remember his face and his voice and his rage. Bill withdrew immediately, and as far as I know, Pop never had his shoes shined at Bill’s again.

The lesson I received from this searing incident was clear: a black person coming to our house had one place and one place only he or she was permitted to knock: the back door.

I realize now that my father’s racial views and his political opinions were joined at the hip. I was not as aware of that back then as I am now, but I got a glimpse of the connection in 1950 when I was thirteen and Pop brought home a small paperback book that took dead aim at Eleanor Roosevelt.

This particular publication was entitled *Weep No More, My
Our home at 234 25th Avenue North, St. Petersburg, Florida. The side door from our living room and the porte cochere, where we kept our car, are to the right.

*Lady,* and it carried on the front cover a caricature of a buck-toothed Mrs. Roosevelt crying crocodile tears. The cover also provided this verbal description: “A Southerner Answers Mrs. Roosevelt’s Report on the ‘Poor and Unhappy’ South.” The author, and publisher, was identified as W. E. Debnam of Raleigh, North Carolina, and the Graphic Press, Inc., also of Raleigh, printed the book. The price was fifty cents, but orders by mail required a dollar for two copies, plus ten cents postage and mailing charge, sent to the author’s home address, which was conveniently provided on the copyright page. By 1953, three years after this little volume first appeared, it had reached its twelfth printing, and author Debnam claimed there were 210,000 copies in print.

My father loved this little book. He kept a copy in his bookcase in the sunroom and referred to it often. Debnam’s effort was
prompted by Mrs. Roosevelt’s comments about the South in her column, “My Day,” which was widely syndicated in newspapers around the country. This particular column followed a trip to Chapel Hill, where Mrs. Roosevelt had spoken at a forum sponsored by the University of North Carolina.

After complimenting the “charm about the South” and the “smell of magnolias” and “the less harried” pace of life, as well as “the grace of living,” the former First Lady had the audacity to say that “underneath it all, I’m not so sure that there are not signs of poverty and unhappiness that will gradually have to disappear if that part of the nation is going to prosper and keep pace with the rest of it.”

This latter statement was enough to set the author off. The rest of the book is a diatribe directed at northern do-gooders who look down their elongated blue noses at poor, benighted Dixie. Adding insult to injury, these spiteful outsiders fail to see the corruption and stench of their own Yankee neighborhoods, like “that great Negro ghetto in the heart of New York that is Harlem,” which Debnam graciously described as “possibly the greatest cesspool of heaped-up-and-pressed-down-and-running-over poverty and crime and spiritual and moral and economic unhappiness on the face of the earth.”

I think the reader can catch the author’s drift. Any shortcomings that the South might manifest, beginning with Black Reconstruction and continuing on to the present day, Debnam laid at the feet of northern exploitation. Reconstruction, “the South’s Gethsemane,” was particularly heinous, and the public looting and government corruption were not the worst of it. That dubious honor belonged to the hitherto unknown fifth “Horseman of the Apocalypse… the Horseman whose name is Fear—astride a horse of Federal blue.” In a thinly veiled reference to the threat posed by black men breaching the sexual color line, Debnam described the desperate plight of southern white men in these terms: “It’s
the Fear of defenseless men facing a foe who strikes by stealth, not against one’s own person, but against the person of his loved ones and the sanctity of his home.” And, of course, the Yankee invaders had encouraged these black animals when they “ate with them and slept with them and danced with them and invited them into their homes.”

This brief picture of Reconstruction in Weep No More, My Lady, and particularly the last line quoted just above, gives me an opportunity to raise one of the critical issues, perhaps the critical issue, on the minds of white southerners of my day and time. Debnam’s language and description—“Fear” with a capital “F,” references to northerners eating and dancing and sleeping with “liberated slaves”—these words were much more than a history lesson. It was a warning to the contemporary South, to my South, to those of us who were responsible for manning the barricades of segregation in the present time. Do not, under any circumstances, let black men through your front door. If you do, they will end up in your bedroom.

I am not sure when I became aware of the sexual threat supposedly posed by black men. I know I learned this at some point, we all did, white boys and white girls. I sometimes think this visceral dread was bred into the marrow of our bones. It was, at its most primal level, the fear of a black seed in a white womb. I know I was not taught this fear the way I was taught other things about race. I did not read books like Ezekiel or Eneas Africanus (which will be discussed shortly) about it. But it was implicit in my Youth’s Confederate Primer when the threat of slave insurrection was raised. And W. E. Debnam made it explicit in his screed against Eleanor Roosevelt, although he set the circumstances for black-white sexual contact in the post–Civil War South and blamed dissolute Yankees for this assault on civilized values. Neither my father nor my mother ever sat me down and explained to me why black men posed such a danger. But I did learn of this existential threat, and
I am sure I learned it at a fairly young age. I knew what Debnam was talking about when I read those words about Reconstruction.

So if there is one point about the South in which I grew up that readers need to understand, it is this: nothing, absolutely nothing, was more important to white southerners, and particularly white southern men, than defending the purity of white southern womanhood.

This concern for female virtue ran in only one direction, of course. Whites considered all black women promiscuous “Jezebels” who lured white men to their beds and who got what they deserved (why else would the age of consent for girls in South Carolina be ten years old until 1895, when it was raised to fourteen? How else can we explain the stunningly brilliant W. J. Cash making reference in *The Mind of the South* to “the sidelong glance of the all-complaisant Negro woman”? No, logical consistency was not an attribute with which white southern males were overly concerned. The white side of the sexual color line was the ultimate line of defense. Lynch mobs were turned loose because of it. Race riots were launched because of it. The entire Jim Crow superstructure existed because of it. The sexual color line was the be-all and end-all for us. And it had been that way for a very long time.

The intersection of race and sex in white southern culture is something I have written about extensively in my scholarship, and I do not think it is necessary to go into elaborate detail about it here. It might, however, be appropriate to offer very modest documentation to illustrate my point about the deep historical roots of this fear.

Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1785 that in ancient Rome “emancipation required but one effort. The slave, when made free, might mix with, without staining the blood of his master.” Not so in the South: “[W]ith us a second is necessary, unknown to history. When freed, he is to be removed beyond reach of mixture.”

Senator Albert Gallatin Brown of Mississippi warned his con-
constituents in October 1860 that Republican-led abolition meant that “the negro . . . shall go to the white man’s table, and the white man to his—that he shall share the white man’s bed, and the white man his—that his son shall marry the white man’s daughter, and the white man’s daughter his son.”

In 1945, Senator Theodore G. Bilbo of Mississippi condemned Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Fair Employment Practices Committee as “nothing but a plot to put niggers to work next to your daughters.”

Four years later, another Mississippian, Congressman John Bell Williams, insisted that scheming American communists and their misguided liberal allies were masking “the rotten stench of their insidious aims under an outward cloak of purity miscalled ‘Civil Rights’” and were actually “attempting to bring about a forced amalgamation of the white and black races.”

In his inaugural address as governor of Alabama in 1963, George Corley Wallace charged that white southerners were being betrayed by northern liberals who were committed to the “false doctrine of communistic amalgamation.” If left unchecked, this pernicious doctrine would result in the creation of a “mongrel unit of one” in the South, “under a single all powerful government.”

These quotes could be repeated almost ad nauseam. My point is this: as a young white man being raised in the Jim Crow South, I was being brought into a hallowed white male brotherhood whether I was conscious of it or not. I was learning to fear and abhor the sexual contamination of white southern females by black male predators. Never mind that this threat was utter nonsense. The fear was there, or, as W. E. Debnam put it, the “Fear.” And any chink in the solid wall of segregation—swimming pools, buses, libraries, you name it, and, God help us, the schools (where black boys and white girls would rub elbows with each other)—would lead in the end to the same dire consequence: the sexual violation of the color line. This expectation was a major reason why white
southerners viewed even the slightest concession toward integration as the beginning of the great unraveling, the pulled thread that would eventually bring the whole Jim Crow tapestry crashing down. As the historian Edward Ayers has perceptively noted, once segregation began in earnest in the late nineteenth century, there was no logical place to stop. The same was true of integration, white southerners believed. Not even the slightest inch could be given; if it were, the full mile would inevitably follow. At the end of that unthinkable road was the proverbial “fate worse than death” for white southern females. In the nineteenth century, “amalgamation” was the word one dare not speak. In the twentieth century, it was “miscegenation.”

In the closing pages of *Weep No More, My Lady*, author Debnam adds a final salient to the South’s defensive perimeter on race. Northerners should keep their cotton-pickin’ hands off the South. “We’re making progress—real progress—toward better racial understanding in the South, but it’s going to take time—a lot of time,” he insisted. And “this constant barrage of criticism by persons outside the South” like you, Mrs. Roosevelt, he concluded, was “one of the greatest road-blocks in the way of better understanding and cooperation between the races—as every man of good will in the South both Negro and white will tell you.” So, listen up, you Yankees: no more Reconstructions, no more outside interference. And stuff a sock in the criticism.

I am not sure when I read *Weep No More, My Lady*, but I did at some point, and I thought it made an excellent argument for southerners (read white southerners) being allowed to solve the race problem in their own good time (which meant more or less never). And Dear certainly agreed with Pop and me about this and about Yankee hypocrisy and pretty much everything else Debnam said. Northerners had been beating up on the South for far too long, and they had their own dirty linen to wash out before they came down to tell us how to deal with any of ours.
In retrospect, nothing displays the pervasive influence of the Jim Crow ethos more clearly to me than the effect it had on my mother. As I noted earlier, she was a kind, compassionate, deeply religious person. And yet Dear could be as unyielding on matters of race as my father. She would never display the anger he manifested on that all-too-memorable morning when Bill came to our house, and she would never use the language he used. John and I were forbidden to say the word “nigger,” even though Pop used it often, as did my Grandmother Dew (which probably accounts for some of the ease with which my father uttered the word). Dear tried to teach us to say “nigra,” which I came to realize later was a pronunciation favored in genteel white circles in the Jim Crow South. But John and I stuck with “Negro,” probably because this is what Illinois said, and we both spent a great deal of time around her when we were growing up.

Dear was convinced that segregation was “best for both races,” as she put it. She genuinely believed that black folks were happy on their side of the color line. Any trouble could be traced to the NAACP (it took me a while before I learned that those initials stood for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). Invariably, she embraced paternalism as the right and proper way to deal with the black men, women, and children with whom she came into personal contact.

The housing situation faced by Illinois and her husband brought this paternalistic quality to the fore when I was in my teens. Illinois was married to a man named Joe Culver, who worked as a “porter” (I was never sure what that meant) at a barbershop downtown. They lived in a rundown rental property, one of many owned by one of my father’s clients—torn screens on the windows, indifferent plumbing that sometimes worked and more often did not, sagging steps, leaky roof, just about anything and everything that came with segregated housing in Methodist Town, the black section of St. Petersburg where Illinois and Joe lived.
When the city government considered implementing some housing codes that would force landlords (“slumlords” would be the more appropriate word here) to upgrade their rental properties, my father went before the city council to argue on behalf of his client against such an ordinance. Yet Illinois and Joe were clearly being victimized by their housing situation. I remember Illinois telling Dear one morning that the torn screens on her house were letting in so many mosquitoes that she and Joe could not sleep at night. Dear and Pop decided they would do something about their housing situation and came up with a plan. They would arrange for Illinois and Joe to buy their own home. I was never sure of the financial aspects surrounding this transaction—some combination of gift and loan, I suspect—but the Culvers were able to get out of the rattrap in which they were living and into a decent home.

I know it was a decent home because I was the only member of my family ever to cross the threshold. After I got my driver’s license, I used to drive Illinois home on a regular basis. One day, she asked me if I would like to come in and see where she and Joe lived. I said sure and accompanied her up the front steps and through her front door. I walked into a modestly furnished but impeccably clean living room and stopped as Illinois paused to give me a chance to take it all in. Her pride was palpable. As I recall, I complimented her on the way the living room looked and said something about how nice the house was, gave her dog, a large, black, friendly mixed breed named Smudge, a pat, and then I left and drove back to my house.

When I mentioned to my mother that I had gone to look at Illinois’s home and seen her living room, she made me sit down and describe to her exactly what I had seen in as much detail as I could possibly remember.

Only later did I get a sense of what had gone on here. Illinois knew there was no way she could invite Dear into her house, but
she wanted my mother and father to know that she and Joe had made a good home. I was the messenger. It was all right for me, a teenage white kid, to walk in, but my parents were another matter altogether. The same racial etiquette that brought Illinois to the back door of our house did not permit my mother to walk even through the front door of hers.

In 1951, the same year I turned fourteen and received my .22, my Lee’s Lieutenants, and my Youth’s Confederate Primer, my mother gave me a small, paper-covered book entitled Eneas Africanus. The author was a man named Harry Stillwell Edwards, and the book was originally published in 1920 by the J. W. Burke Company of Macon, Georgia; my edition carried a reprint date of 1951.

As I recall, it was not any sort of special gift, certainly not a birthday present. I remember receiving those all at once, and Dear’s gift came later that year. She just loved the book, I think, and felt that I would, too.

Essentially, Eneas Africanus is a more adult version of the Ezekiel tales—amusing, affectionate, in its way, toward the caricatured black central character, and heavily reliant for its humor on the foibles and eccentric speech patterns of the fictional Eneas Africanus. And, again, very much like Ezekiel, it is deeply racist.

The book is sitting on my desk as I write this. My junior high, Palmer Method signature is on the inside front cover. The frontispiece is a sepia-tinted sketch, in profile, of an aged, white-haired black man, with a white beard covering the bottom half of his face. His eyes are almost closed and his lips are pressed tightly together, as if he were facing into a stiff wind. The caption under this picture reads “Eneas Africanus, the fast vanishing type.”

The “fast vanishing type” this fictional character represented was what was known as “Sambo,” or the “faithful darkie,” when I was growing up. Southern stereotypes about male African Americans had undergone a seesaw effect in the late nineteenth and into the twentieth century. The antebellum “Sambo” had given way to
the menacing “black beast rapist” of Thomas Dixon’s best-selling 1905 novel The Clansman (the book on which D. W. Griffith based his enormously successful 1915 film Birth of a Nation). But by the 1920s, the dominant image had reverted back to what the historian Joel Williamson calls the “neo-Sambo” stereotype, or, closer to what I heard in my earlier years, the “faithful darkie.” 15 This stock figure was inherently lazy, mischievous, often a teller of tall tales, and not very bright, but he knew his proper place in society and was devoted to his white folks, dependent on them for guidance and the patronage that put bread on his table (and, on occasion, offered protection from lynch mobs composed of poor white crackers). “Sambo” spoke in a thick, almost impenetrable, dialect, garbled his syntax, and was capable of producing hilarious malapropisms. When John S. Tilley, author of my Youth’s Confederate Primer, described slaves as “childlike, good natured, well-behaved” hands, he was articulating, in near-perfect capsule form, the essential qualities of this stereotype.

This caricature of the dim-witted black man-child (i.e., “boy”) had been around for a very long while in the minds of white southerners. Before the years between about 1890 and 1915, the era Joel Williamson calls the period of “Radical racism”—the years of Dixon’s venomous novels, out-of-control lynching, and the bloody Atlanta race riot of 1906—“Sambo” had been the dominant black male stereotype. 16 Some three decades before the Civil War, my ancestor, Thomas Roderick Dew, astute fellow that he was, described this white southern image with remarkable clarity. The enslaved people of his beloved Southland “form the happiest portion of our society,” he wrote in 1832. “A merrier being does not exist on the face of the globe than the negro slave of the United States.” This southern Eden faced an omnipresent danger, however, a malevolent force to be kept at bay at all cost—the Yankee abolitionist. “Sambo” was loyal and lovable most of the time, Dew continued, but those vile northerners could transform “the most
harmless and happy creature that lives on earth . . . into a dark designing and desperate rebel.”

If one were to strike the word “slave” after “negro” in the first of Dew’s passages quoted above and substitute “integrationist” for “rebel” in the second, and cloak the twentieth-century villain in the garb of the NAACP (instead of Garrisonian broadcloth), Dew’s words could, and probably would, have been used to describe the state of race relations in the South by every adult white person I knew when I was growing up. Our black folks, our “Sambo,” our “faithful darkies,” were “harmless and happy,” again to use T. R. Dew’s words, but God save us if those villainous outside agitators ever got ahold of them.

So what was the story of Eneas Africanus, this “fast vanishing type”?

The “Author’s Preface” sets the stage beautifully. “Dear to the hearts of the [white] Southerners, young and old, is the vanishing type, conspicuous in Eneas of this record; and as in a side-light herein are seen the [white] Southerners themselves, kind of heart, tolerant and appreciative of the humor and pathos of the Negro’s life,” Harry Stillwell Edwards wrote. “Eneas would have been arrested in any country other than the South,” he continued, but the aged Negro “could have traveled his life out as the guest of his ‘white folks’” in the American South. “Is this story true?” Edwards asked at the end of this brief introduction. “Everybody says it is.”

The story begins with an 1872 advertisement supposedly placed in newspapers across the South by one George E. Tommey, “Late Major, Tommey’s Legion, C. S. A.” (we are soon told that “next to General Joseph Johnston,” Major Tommey was “the bravest man in the Georgia armies”). The good Major is seeking the return of a silver “Bride’s Cup,” entrusted to “an old family Negro” for transportation to a safe place in 1864 as Sherman’s troops approached Tommeyville, the family homestead. The “old family Negro” is,
of course, Eneas Africanus, described as “a small grey-haired old fellow and very talkative.”

Major Tommey’s only daughter, eighteen-year-old Beauregard Forrest (“a petite brunette of great beauty” whose name has been changed by an “act of the Georgia Legislature . . . in honor of the two heroes of the Confederacy, dear to the heart of her illustrious father”), is about to be married, and for generations every bride in the family has taken a drink of pure water from that cup on her wedding day. The promise of such a draft is engraved on the cup: “A happy grandchile on each knee” will surely follow.

Eneas Africanus and the cup have disappeared, and now, eight years after he was last seen leaving the plantation in a loaded wagon pulled by an old mare named Lady Chain, Major Tommey is desperately looking for the missing Bride’s Cup.

The story unfolds in a series of letters sparked by the Major’s advertisement, and it soon becomes evident that Eneas has become hopelessly confused and is looking literally all over the South for “Thomasville” instead of “Tommeyville” (the “confused freedman” was a variant on the “faithful darkie” stereotype in the years following the end of the Civil War). Eneas’s travels have taken him (a map is helpfully provided to trace his wanderings) to Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, and finally to North and South Carolina as the fateful wedding day approaches.

Do Eneas and the cup arrive in time? Of course they do! (How often do historians get to use an exclamation point?) A newspaper reporter, present to cover the wedding, gives us the scene.

“In the red light of the bonfire an old Negro suddenly appeared,” and the black and white crowd, assembled to watch the wedding, rushes forward. It is, naturally, Eneas Africanus.

“‘Eneas, you black rascal, where have you been?’” the Major shouts.

“‘Oh, Lord! Marse George! Glory be ter God! Out o’ de wilderness! De’ projekin son am back ergin!’” cries Eneas.
“Where have you been, sir?” the Major asks, “…choking with tears and laughter.”

“All over the blessed worl’, Marse George! But I’m home ergin!—You hyar me, Niggers?—home ergin!—”

Eneas has not only returned with the Bride’s Cup, he has also remarried and has brought with him his new wife and “a small colony of children,” who tumble out of the wagon “like cooters from a log.”

“I done brought you a whole bunch o’ new Yallerhama, Burningham Niggers, Marse George! Some folks tell me dey is free, but I know dey b’long ter Marse Tommey, des like Lady Chain and her colt!” Eneas adds proudly.

To bring this touching story to a close, the bride and groom (“Mirabeau Lamar Temple, of Dallas, Tex.”) drink from the cup, displaying much joy and appropriate embarrassment at the expectation that progeny will soon be forthcoming.

In the final scene, Eneas (who departed in 1864 with “all the Confederate money the family [had] left”) tries to return his remaining funds to “Marse George.”

“Keep it, Eneas,’ said the Major, almost exploding with laughter, and patting the old man on the shoulder, ‘that bunch of Burningham Yallerhama Niggers more than squares us.”

I do not think very much explication is required at this point about Eneas Africanus. To repeat a point made earlier, much the same comments could be offered about this story as were offered when Ezekiel was discussed at the beginning of this chapter, although the supposed humor involved in Eneas’s insistence that his children—that “whole bunch o’ new Yallerhama, Burningham Niggers”—are slaves belonging to “Marse George,” just “like Lady Chain and her colt,” goes well beyond the most offensive of the countless racist elements in the Ezekiel stories. I think the main thing that needs to be said is that my education into the ways of the white South continued as I grew older. What was presented
to me as a child in the *Ezekiel* tales was presented to me again as a teenage boy in *Eneas Africanus*. It was a process of repetition and reinforcement, not in any necessarily didactic sense, but just something that occurred in the normal course of my growing up on the white side of the color line in the Jim Crow South. “Charles loved the *Ezekiel* stories,” I can hear Dear saying to herself, “and I’ll bet he’ll enjoy *Eneas Africanus*, too.” And, of course, I did back then, very much.

As should be evident by now, there was an extraordinary circulation of these distinctly regional publications back when I was younger. As was the case with the *Youth’s Confederate Primer* and *Weep No More, My Lady*, books like *Eneas Africanus* were publicized by word of mouth and passed from hand to hand among white southerners, and I suspect they had a considerable influence in forming that elusive thing known as public opinion. I know they influenced opinion in my household. And I happen to think these little volumes deserve much more serious scholarly scrutiny than they have received. In that pre-Internet era, they served as the equivalent of a Jim Crow blogosphere, confirming crude and outrageous stereotypes, validating sulfurous misinformation and historical myth, and elevating our prejudices and our bigotries to the status of revealed truth.

One point in the story of Eneas’s journey triggered a memory in me, something I literally had not thought about for many years.

When Eneas first returns, he refers to himself as “De’ projekin son.” This mangling of “prodigal” made me remember a phonograph record Pop brought home one day when I was probably eight or nine years old. The record was entitled “The Peasel Tree Sermon,” but it had very little identifying information beyond that—no record company label, for example. It was supposed to be a recording of a sermon a Negro preacher came up with spontaneously after “letin’ de’ Bible drap op’n” and taking as his text the first thing that caught his eye (I am asking the reader’s indulgence
here; I am writing in dialect to try to convey how these words sounded to me):

“An’ de’ chil’en of Isre’l wharsh’p de’ Lawd wit de’ harp, and wit de’ inst’ument of de’ seben strings, an’ wit de’ p-s-a-l-t-r-e. Hmmm. ‘P-s-a-l-t-r-e.’ An’ wit de’, an’ wit de’ Peasel T ree!”

The entire sermon then becomes a series of elaborate, totally made-up “biblical” tales based on the preacher’s misreading of the word “psalter.” The magical “Peasel Tree” plays a key role in all sorts of wondrous doings, and as a boy, I was fascinated and endlessly amused by these fabulous tales.

I even memorized long passages. I had a reasonably good ear for mimicry, and I mastered the preacher’s dialect well enough to entertain the entire Dew family—aunts, uncles, cousins, Grandmother Dew, all of us—when we would gather in one of our homes for Thanksgiving and Christmas, which we did every year when I was growing up.

Our recording of “The Peasel Tree Sermon” has long since disappeared, but I can still remember snatches of some of those passages, and one story line I can recall in some detail.

The Children of Israel are being held in bondage in Egypt, and Moses employs the Peasel Tree to try to secure their release (again, I request the reader’s indulgence as I attempt to re-create what I heard and memorized):

“Moses, he cut a limb from de’ Peasel Tree, an’ he say, ‘I’m gwine make a staf’ from dat limb an’ walk up to Mr. Pharaoh’s front do’ an’ tell him to turn my people loose.’”

“Now, Mr. Pharaoh, he be’s quality white folks, in dem times, and dem parts, an’ Moses, he walk up to Mr. Pharaoh’s front do’, an’ he bang on dat do’ wit de’ Peasel Tree staf’.”

“An’ Mr. Pharaoh, he cum to de’ do’ an’ he say, ‘Moses, what you doin’ cummin’ up to white folk’s front do’?”

“An’ Moses, he say, ‘Mr. Pharaoh, I wants you to turn my people loose.’”
“An’ Mr. Pharaoh, he say, ‘I ain’t gwine do it, Moses.’”

“An’ Moses, he say, ‘Mr. Pharaoh! I wants you to turn my people loose!’”

“An’ Mr. Pharaoh, he say, ‘Moses, how many times I got to tel’ you, I ain’t gwine do it!’”

“An’ den Moses, he cast dat’ Peasel Tree staf’ down to de’ groun’, and it turn into a fiery serpent!”

“An’ Mr. Pharaoh, he say, ‘Moses, now dat I’s thinkin’ on it, dem chillin’ of Isre’l is mighty po’ field hands, ain’t worth much no how. I’s gwine turn ’em loose!’”

Having accomplished this first step, Moses then employs the Peasel Tree to part the Red Sea so that the Israelites can cross. He mounts the Peasel Tree in a sturdy wagon to lead the way:

“I wants dat wagon pul’ed by a couple o’ big Missouri mules,’ Moses say. ‘Don’t hitch up any o’ dem shamblin’ liddle cotton field mules to dat wagon!’”

And, pulled by those big Missouri mules, the Peasel Tree clears a path through the Red Sea and leads the Children of Israel to the Promised Land.

When I delivered my holiday recitations, I was probably nine or ten years old. (I suspect one reason I remember this story is because of the reference to Moses coming to the front door of Pharaoh’s house; the incident involving my father and Bill was never too far from my conscious state.)

I am not proud to tell this story, but I do so to make a point: like Ezekiel and Eneas Africanus, there was nothing about “The Peasel Tree Sermon” that any of us found in the slightest degree offensive. In fact, just the opposite was true: we all found it very funny and thoroughly entertaining. Based as it was on black stereotypes almost universally accepted by white southerners back then, it was like telling a “Rastus and Lulabelle” joke shorn of the risqué elements. We all did it. We all laughed at it. And we all thought nothing of it.
White amusement over black language was omnipresent in the South in which I grew up. In our house, all of us were aware of certain words and speech mannerisms Illinois used regularly, and we adopted many of them, smilingly, into our family vocabulary.

She would invert the two parts of some words—“boxcars” would become “carboxes” and “grasshoppers” would become “hoppergrasses,” for example. If someone was overweight, they were “rich looking.” My brother, John, who was rapidly growing into his six-foot-plus frame, was “big limbded.” If she happened to be in the kitchen in the late afternoon when our big basset hound, Rascal, started begging for his dinner, she would observe that “he be’s hongry.” Illinois told us she and Joe had begun to leave their dog, Smudge, in the house when they went to work because some boys in the neighborhood had started “chunkin’ at him” if they left him outside. If one of us looked particularly good one day, Illinois would compliment us by saying we “just looked so fine,” with an emphasis on the “fine.” We used these words and phrases all the time, never in the presence of Illinois, but they became a part of my family’s way of speaking.

Over the years, I have wondered about how I should think about this. Our amusement—the smiles that would come to our faces when we spoke as she did—was in some ways a mark of our affection for her, but I have come to believe that this was the sort of affection one would extend to a family pet. By mimicking her, we were patronizing her, not in any mean sense, but we were patronizing her nonetheless. And human beings normally do not patronize those we consider our equals.

I have written in some detail about Illinois to this point but have had very little to say about Ed, the African American man who worked at our home. The primary reason for this neglect is that I remember very little about him. He came to our house once a week to cut the grass (with a hand-pushed mower), put in a full day’s work, and then we did not see him again until the following
week. I did not even know his last name. Illinois, by contrast, was at our house several times a week, and John and I interacted with her constantly. The one clear memory I have about Ed is not directly associated with his presence; it was triggered by his absence.

I am not sure how old I was when this happened, probably eight or nine, but Ed failed to show up for work one day, and Illinois told us he had had to be hospitalized. I cannot recall if I ever learned the cause, but Ed obviously was facing some sort of health trouble. The hospital, Mercy Hospital, was, of course, a Jim Crow facility.

My father called Mercy Hospital to see how Ed was doing, and I happened to overhear Pop’s side of the conversation.

I was almost as surprised by what he said and how he said it as I had been to hear him explode at Bill years earlier. Pop stammered, he could not find the right words to say what he wanted to say, he sounded confused and inarticulate. I had never heard him speak that way before. He was normally supremely self-confident when he spoke, chose his words carefully and well, “a man of round conterdunction,” as he liked to describe himself (using a word he may well have invented—I never heard anyone else use it, before or since). He was anything but a “man of round conterdunction” on this occasion.

I assume this conversation ended when my father found out what he wanted to know, but I am not certain. What I remember distinctly was his profound unease.

I think I know what was going on here. Pop was dealing with a black professional on the other end of the phone, with an educated, trained hospital employee. And he had absolutely no idea how to talk to this person. He was used to dealing with servants coming to our home (or, in the case of Bill, someone who tried to come to our home the wrong way). The person at Mercy Hospital was, again to use one of Pop’s favorite phrases, a very “different breed of cat.” And he was supremely uncomfortable in this situation.
I do not remember seeing very much of Ed after this; his health problem may have been a serious one. What I do remember was my father’s severe discomfort when he tried to find out what that problem was.

If there was one thing in my youthful education as a racist that offered a push in the direction of inclusion and genuine appreciation of black culture, it was the radio. I loved to listen to the radio. I even persuaded Dear and Pop to let me have a small radio on my bedside table. At night, when I was ten or eleven years old and was supposed to be trying to go to sleep, I would scan the dial looking for something to listen to. One night, I discovered WLAC.21

These call letters were carried by a clear-channel 50,000-watt radio station in Nashville that broadcast an amazingly strong signal into my part of the South. In the evenings, the disc jockeys—I remember Gene Nobles, “Hoss” Allen, and “John R”—played what I soon learned were “rhythm and blues” records. The music and the musicians were amazing. B. B. (“Blues Boy,” the DJs called him) King, Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, Little Walter, John Lee Hooker—I had never heard any of these performers before. Our local radio stations never played them, or any music remotely that good. I listened every night, if I could. I never ordered any records from one of the principal sponsors, Randy’s Record Shop in Gallatin, Tennessee. But I appreciated what I was hearing; I loved what I was hearing.

Did any of this act as a countervailing force to the steady diet of Jim Crow customs and stereotypes and dialect-based humor that surrounded me during these years? I honestly do not know. But I hope that it did. Maybe this music was at least some sort of antidote to the racial poison I absorbed every day. These men and women were fabulous performers, the music the best I had ever heard. I hope some of that got through to me in ways that transcended simply keeping time to the beat of those incredible songs.

If there was something I heard on WLAC that reinforced the
black stereotypes I had acquired over my ten or eleven or twelve years growing up in the South, it was probably the advertising. The products seemed to me to be aimed at an African American audience—Thunder Bolt Perfume, Bruton’s Snuff, and White Rose Petroleum Jelly are the ones I remember. These would add an amusing note to my listening. But I hope any such thoughts were submerged in the sound of B. B. King’s blues guitar. These wonderful musicians demonstrated, and I think in some ways I recognized, that black culture and black people were not confined to the likes of Ezekiel and Eneas Africanus and the preacher of “The Peasel Tree Sermon.”

I could not continue my radio listening when I left for Woodberry Forest School in the fall of 1951. The rules were strict—nothing allowed after that final bell rang on the dorm every night. If you broke the rules, demerits would follow, and demerits had to be run off by going multiple times around a driveway circling much of the campus (“I ran a mile for a Camel” was a phrase we used regularly, although, fortunately, I had never started smoking and was uninterested in sneaking an illegal cigarette).

I am sorry to say that my time at Woodberry did nothing to break the hold of my Jim Crow upbringing. Indeed, almost everything surrounding me at the school reinforced it. All the masters were white. All the students were white, and almost all came from the South. Most of my “Rastus and Lulabelle” jokes I learned from my classmates there. When I went to visit friends’ homes in places like Richmond, it was like going back to St. Pete: the help was black, the city was segregated.

There were many black men and women around the school, but they all had jobs in the kitchen or worked maintaining the grounds or served on the dorms in various menial ways. For example, once a week we put our dirty laundry in bags outside our dorm room for pickup and transportation to the school laundry. The African American man who worked on my dorm that first
year was named Claude (I never learned his last name), and he would call out “Laundry day, laundry day!” every week when it rolled around. One boy on my dorm would mimic him when he did this. “Laundree day, Claude, laundree day!” he would yell, over and over again. I had been brought up never to consciously humiliate anyone, and I had no doubt that this was offensive behavior on this boy’s part. But I never went so far as to call him on it. If I had, I am reasonably sure that someone, probably this boy, would have fired back, “What are you, Dew, some sort of nigger lover?” I was not willing to run that risk.

I mentioned earlier that every master at Woodberry had a nickname (“Red Cheese,” “R.C.A.,” “Brightmo Ghoul,” “Uncle Mattie,” the list was endless). Many of the African American workers had nicknames as well. I cannot recall many of these now, but I have never forgotten one.

The students served as waiters in the dining hall—useful training for the sons of privilege, I am sure was one reason. But we would pass in and out of the kitchen when we were waiting tables, and the work staff there was entirely black. One man in particular was a powerful individual, tall, muscular, with biceps that seemed as big as footballs to us. Whenever we had ice cream for dessert, he would scoop individual portions out of those frozen tubs as if he were lifting a cup of feathers. His nickname was “Super Nigger.” I cannot recall ever saying that; I hope I did not. Dear’s prohibition against the use of that word was absolute. I have an idea in the back of my mind that I shortened that supremely offensive nickname to “Supe”—not much of an act of courage on my part, but at least it allowed me to avoid using the tainted word. But I did not have the guts to challenge those who did.

All of this, from my infancy spent with Ezekiel through my three teenage years at Woodberry, all of this had trained me, once again, as a son of the South. But this training was different from my training as a Confederate youth. This training made me a rac-
ist, this training had real consequences, this training made me a part of the problem, the major problem of the South of my era: racial injustice on a massive scale, cradle-to-grave segregation. I had become a son of the Jim Crow South.

This was the heavy baggage, the unthinking baggage, I would be carrying north with me when I was seventeen and preparing to start my freshman year at Williams. Whether my white southern attitudes would survive my four years at a New England college was very much an open question at this point. Certainly nothing was predestined. Shucking that reptilian skin would not be easy.